
Skeptical Adversaria

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FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

Two newspaper articles on quite different subjects that I read recently raised similar questions about the information value of the conclusions presented.

The riots

The first of these concerned the riots in different parts of the country in August this year. I read that our Prime Minister, Mr Cameron, announced that a high proportion of the rioters were known criminals – i.e. they already had convictions for previous offences. I think Mr Cameron was trying to dismiss the theory that the rioters were disaffected young people who were venting their frustrations about inequality and lack of amenity and opportunity to get on in life. However, the fact that many rioters, whether they were frustrated with their lives or not, had previous convictions is entirely predictable. The people who engage in lawless behaviour such as violence, burglary, robbery and criminal damage usually have previous convictions on record (which often includes drug offences).

THINGS HAPPEN!

Concerning the cause or causes of the riots, sceptics may have different ideas about the various theories but is there any particular sceptical position that one might adopt? Here is *my* sceptical approach. Where you have a clamour of voices, including those of

well-informed people, providing disparate and inconsistent explanations for some complex phenomenon, notably one involving human behaviour, there is one explanation that above all others will bring calmness and good sense to bear on the problem. THINGS HAPPEN! Yes indeed. People riot. And the question is what should be done when people start rioting to stop them. My own opinion? Hit 'em good and hard!

I have a good memory of the riots in our cities 30 years ago. I am sure I am not the only person who, on hearing of the demonstration in Tottenham on 6.8.11 about the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan by police officers and the subsequent riot, immediately predicted the spread of rioting to other localities across the country. I do not know if the Home Office took any anticipatory action (such as contacting police chiefs across the country and advising them on action to be taken) but someone responsible should have done.

But what about the 'underlying causes' – poverty, inequality, stunted opportunity, broken families, cuts in welfare and amenities, corporate greed, etc.? Isn't the message of the riots that something should be done about all of these things? My answer is that something should be done anyway, regardless of the riots.

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Dyslexia

The second article that I read was in the 'Body+Soul' section of the *Times* (24.9.11) which describes how in many ways children labelled 'dyslexic' tend to be more talented and able than those who are not. *Generally speaking* this is again predictable. There is a correlation between reading ability and intelligence but dyslexic children have much greater difficulty reading than their IQ would predict. Hence the lower a child's intelligence the less likely he or she is to be labelled 'dyslexic'.

LOGIC AND INTUITION

Sometimes, in everyday life, we are suddenly faced with a simple situation that demands an immediate answer, but somehow our mind seems to seize up and we just cannot see what the solution is. At least, this happens to me and I don't think I'm that different from anybody else.

Who is paying for my whisky?

The other day I got into a bit of a dither at the check-out in Tesco's. I had taken advantage of 'a special offer' to replenish my stock of malt whisky and the bill came to £50. Naturally I pay for this commodity from my own pocket but as I was about to take out my debit card my wife said that she would pay for the whiskey out of the housekeeping (to which we contribute equally) and I could reimburse the housekeeping with £50 in cash. This immediately seemed to me unfair on my wife, since of the £50 that I

would be giving to the housekeeping, half would be spent on me (i.e. I would get half of it back), which would not be the case if I gave the £50 to the woman at the check-out. Anyway, it seemed to take an inordinate amount of puzzling to convince me that it made no difference at all. Perhaps you can work out the reason right away.

Albert and his two sisters

Albert lives in Sheffield and has a sister in Barnsley and a sister in Doncaster. He visits one of his sisters every Saturday

by bus. Both the Barnsley bus and the Doncaster bus call at the stop just outside his house and both services are at 20-minute intervals. In order not to show any favoritism to his sisters, Albert always chooses a time at random to go to the bus stop and he catches the first bus to come along. Yet 9 times out of 10 he ends up at his sister's in Barnsley. How could this be?

Answer on page 12.

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

Fluoridation and the Nazis

Recently there was a presentation on water fluoridation (or fluoridisation) at Sheffield Skeptics in the Pub by two dental students. The speakers were in favour of adding fluoride to the public water supply to assist in the prevention of tooth decay in the population. 'Fluoride' refers to ions of the element fluorine when one of its compounds, such as sodium fluoride, is dissolved in water. The fact that fluorine is a poisonous gas need cause no alarm (as it appears to do to some opponents of fluoridation): chlorine is also a poisonous gas but the food we eat contains sodium chloride and indeed most people add this to their food in the form of common salt. The fluoride compounds that are added to the water supply are usually sodium fluoride, fluorosilicic acid, or sodium fluorosilicate. Some water supplies already have quantities of naturally occurring fluoride, even to the extent that the concentration level needs

reducing. Fluoride is also present in certain foods and drinks, most notably tea. In certain areas of the UK, as well as in parts of the USA and Europe, fluoride is already put into the water supply. For years it has been deliberately added to many toothpastes and it is possible to buy fluoridated salt. One established side effect of excess fluoride is dental fluorosis, which is associated with specks and stains on the tooth enamel, and in serious cases some structural damage.

There are rational grounds for questioning whether fluoridation of the public water supply should be undertaken.

The speakers at the above meeting did a good job presenting the case for and against fluoridation of the water supply but they were obviously in favour. It was evident from chatting to members of the audience beforehand

that there were some who disapproved of the whole idea.

There are rational grounds for questioning whether fluoridation of the public water supply should be undertaken. There are concerns about freedom, choice and personal responsibility and the role of government. There are arguments about whether there aren't better ways to spend money improving the dental health of the populace. Although well-conducted investigations appear to indicate that there are no serious health hazards associated with the concentrations of fluoride that are used, a cautious, 'better safe than sorry' policy may be preferred. But there appears to be something else at work that seems to fall short of a reasonable and objective approach to deciding on how best to proceed.

It seems generally accepted that the presence of the minute traces of the fluoride compounds that are added to the water supply cannot be detected by

someone drinking it because the colour, taste and odour of the water is not affected. Now, people are naturally very nervous about any suggestion that something as universal as the water we drink, or the air we breath, is deliberately contaminated by something that is undetectable. Maybe it is partly to do with not feeling in control. Consider, for example, the people living a few streets from my house. Quite a number of them smoke or drink to excess; some ensure that their children are overfed and under-exercised; many drive huge, status-symbol cars that, more than most, pollute the atmosphere with chemicals; and many overexpose themselves to the sun's ultraviolet rays. They seem quite happy to do some or all of these things, which have been clearly demonstrated to cause ill-health; yet last year they were up in arms at the proposed siting of a mobile phone mast in their neighbourhood, fearing that the radiation emitted would present a serious health hazard for their children, despite the paucity of evidence for this and the lack of a good rationale why it should be so. Maybe the people concerned feel that they can do something to control the previously mentioned health risks but they are powerless to do anything about something so pervasive, invisible and intangible as the radiation emitted from this 'unnatural' source that was going to be inflicted upon them.

Even so, we live in a free and democratic society and if, for any of the above reasons, enough people don't want something imposed on them, maybe that's sufficient reason not to go ahead.

When the speakers at our meeting had finished their presentation the first question came from one of those members who I had previously detected was more than a little antagonistic to water fluoridation. She asked the speakers about reports that Hitler and Stalin put fluoride in the water supply as a means of subduing the population. The speakers did not appear to be aware of this; I don't think many of us were

either. I decided that the best way to find out more was through the internet and I did a Google search a few days after the meeting.

Nothing prepared me for what appeared on my laptop.

Nothing prepared me for what appeared on my laptop. Much of what comes up is in opposition to fluoridation, but the breadth and intensity of the hostility expressed strikes me as going way beyond what should be a reasonable and measured appraisal based on a careful consideration of reliable evidence. Over the 45 years that I have been aware of this topic I have always assumed that the principal motivation for fluoridation, whether it be sound or flawed, has been driven by well-meaning dentists and doctors who have only the welfare of the public at heart (and, indeed, who might lose business if their advice proved correct). But, according to some 'authorities', it is a vast conspiracy by politicians to drug the population into a state of docility and submission.

It seems that the inspiration for this, according to one Charles Elliott Perkins, came from pre-war Communist Russia. Perkins was an American biochemist and physiologist who, in 1952, wrote a book entitled *The Truth about Water Fluoridation (note 1)* in which he warns readers that putting sodium fluoride in the water supply will cause a disastrous catalogue of human suffering in the targeted population. However, although he acknowledges that support for the policy comes from well-meaning, though misguided, members of the medical and dental professions, the real motive is the desire of politicians to achieve something much more sinister. Of water fluoridation in the USA he writes:

It is a planned experiment in mass medication which is part of the technique of Communist philosophy to

implant itself in America through mass control of the people by the State.

He goes on to say:

Mass medication, involving the fluoridation of the public water supply systems, has long been known as an important technique of the Communist philosophy of mass control.

And:

The scheme of water fluoridation was taken to England by the English-born Russian Communist Kreminoff in 1935. Laski, believed to be the head of the English radical socialists at the time, mentioned it in an article he wrote for HARPER'S MAGAZINE that year. Shortly thereafter the English socialists, who had many sympathetic supporters and followers in high places in this country, introduced the fluoridation movement in the United States.

(Harold Laski [1983-1950] was a Marxist and Professor of Political Science at LSE and, in 1935, a member of the Socialist League, along with people such as Barbara Castle and Michael Foot. Having once left the Labour Party he later rejoined and was its chairman from 1945-6. I have been unable to find any reference to the person called Kreminoff; perhaps the name is misspelt.)

Perkins was writing at the time of the communist witch-hunting period when there was great paranoia in the USA about the idea that communist sympathisers had infiltrated government agencies (as well as the film industry). The city of Washington (population 802,178) had already had its water supply fluoridated, about which Perkins says:

So, 802,178 "sleeping dogs" in Washington, who are deprived of the right to vote, are lying and waiting for their health to be ruined and their children to have mottled and ugly teeth, while a small group of fanatical advocates of artificial water fluoridation, who at the moment have control of certain of our government agencies, proceed with their

Communist experiment in mass medication on the unsuspecting and compliant people who have been lulled into sleep by their cleverly contrived propaganda.

Nowhere in Perkins's book does he mention the use of fluoridation by German Nazis. The source of this claim is a letter, much-quoted in the countless copy-and-paste anti-fluoridation websites, by Perkins to the Lee Foundation for Nutritional Research in Milwaukee, dated 2.10.54. (As far as I can tell, this letter does not appear in the Foundation's archives [note 2]). In this letter he says:

I have your letter of September 29 asking for further documentation regarding a statement made in my book, "The Truth about Water Fluoridation", to the effect that the idea of water fluoridation was brought to England from Russia by the Russian Communist Kreminoff. In the 1930's Hitler and the German Nazis envisioned a world to be dominated and controlled by a Nazi philosophy of pan-Germanism. The German chemists worked out a very ingenious and far-reaching plan of mass-control which was submitted to and adopted by the German General Staff. This plan was to control the population in any given area through mass medication of drinking water supplies. By this method they could control the population in whole areas, reduce population by water medication that would produce sterility in women, and so on. In this scheme of mass-control, sodium fluoride occupied a prominent place.

Note that Perkins does not actually provide 'further documentation regarding a statement made in my book.....' He goes on to say:

When the Nazis under Hitler decided to go to Poland, both the German General Staff and the Russian General Staff exchanged scientific and military ideas, plans, and personnel, and the scheme of mass control through water medication was seized upon by the

Russian Communists because it fitted ideally into their plans to communize the world.

This is not consistent with any assertion that fluoridation as a means of controlling the populace was an issue in pre-war communist Russia.

Perkins then says:

I was told of this entire scheme by a German chemist who was an official of the great I.G. Farben chemical industries and was also prominent in the Nazi movement at the time.

(I.G. Farben refers to I.G. Farbenindustrie AG, the great German chemical conglomerate, which was dismantled by the Allies after WWII).

I have not located any websites that report material evidence that the Nazis fluoridated water supplies for the purposes of subduing those accessing the water.

Perkins does not mention any of this in his book. I suppose there is just a possibility he was told about this after his book came out. Another oft-quoted source for the use of fluoridation by the Nazis is found in the following passage from an anti-fluoridation website (note 3):

The Gestapo you see had little concern about sodium fluoride's 'supposed' effect on children's teeth; instead, their reason for mass-medicating water with sodium fluoride was to STERILIZE HUMANS and force the people in their concentration camps into calm, bovine, submission. (See for reference: "The Crime and Punishment of I.G. Farben" written by Joseph Borkin.)

This book, a history of Farben until its demise, is referred to in countless cut-and-paste anti-fluoridation websites to support the theory that the Nazis used fluoridation for mind control. The book is available online (note 4). In fact it contains no reference at all to fluoride. Neither does the book mention Perkins,

despite the fact that many websites state that after the war he was appointed by the United States government to take charge of Farben chemical plants in Germany. (I have been unable to find any sources other than anti-fluoridation literature for this; the earliest reference to it that I have located is in a letter to the Port Angeles Evening News, dated 11.1.63, from Mrs R.S. Gilmore, who states that Perkins was 'appointed...to help take charge' of Farben' (note 5). Any further information on this from readers would be very welcome.)

I conclude that the sole evidence that people adduce for the nefarious use of fluoridation by the Nazis is from the letter that Perkins wrote to the Lee Foundation in 1954 in which he claims he was told of a plan to this effect by a (unnamed) employee of Farben IG. I have not located any websites that report material evidence that the Nazis fluoridated water supplies for the purposes of subduing those accessing the water. Any such evidence on this will be gratefully received.

Mrs Thatcher is accused!

Now study this from an anti-fluoridation website (note 6):

[Was] Mrs Thatcher's astronomical expenditure of United Kingdom's revenue on a fluoridation campaign in Northern Ireland a matronly concern for the youngsters' teeth, or perhaps an attempt to sedate the people and render them subservient to her autocratic dictates? Remember this. Mrs Thatcher has a background of academic chemistry and would be far from ignorant of the tranquillising effects of the halogens and their halides.

Similarly, her legal and political shenanigans (that is the only word to describe her behaviour) in the England fluoridation scene offer many avenues for questioning of her motives.

Is it relevant?

Is any of the above relevant? Even if the Nazis did plan to put sodium fluoride in the water supply to subjugate the populace, or if they did implement this

plan, what evidence is there that it would have the intended consequence? What concentration is necessary to produce such an effect? Is it not more often the case that when small concentrations of a substance have a beneficial effect, or are even essential, at higher concentrations adverse effects begin to emerge (cf. sodium chloride)?

I am trying to make up by mind about the advisability of fluoridation. I

do not find any of this hullabaloo about what the Nazis are supposed to have done of any relevance whatsoever to my deliberations.

Notes

1. This book may be downloaded at <http://www.soilandhealth.org/copyform.aspx?bookcode=020170>
2. <http://www.seleneriverpress.com/lee-foundation-for-nutritional-research-archive>

3. <http://violetflame.biz.ly/main/FluorideStupidity.htm>
4. http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/sociopolitica/sociopol_igfarben02.htm
5. <http://www.newspaperarchive.com/SiteMap/FreePdfPreview.aspx?img=114810205>
6. <http://www.whale.to/b/stephen.html>

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Art and language

Like many ‘fringe’ authors, some artists and commentators on the arts apparently believe that scholars – including linguists – hold (or can reasonably be read as holding) that their theories and observations as published in books and articles are definitely correct, not admitting of any challenges, alternative stances or modifications. One such writer is Emma Cocker, who finds this supposed viewpoint unwelcome because of her own focus on the ‘margins’ between entities and the uncertainty of analyses (a popular theme among artists).

Although those of us who are active skeptics do of course find **some** alternative ideas ill-founded, this very ‘strong’ interpretation of what we say reflects a serious (and surprising) error in respect of our intent. Most academics – while confident enough to subject their ideas to scrutiny through publication – are well aware of the provisional nature of academic ‘conclusions’ and of the large amounts of uncertainty which obtain (perhaps especially, but not exclusively, in the humanities and social sciences). (However, we **are** also – naturally – much more interested than are artists in the **resolution** of uncertainties wherever possible, by synthesis or by the identification of some analyses as preferable to others.)

Some writers of this kind also advance more specific ideas (not necessarily non-mainstream) about language – though not always very explicitly or clearly; they are accustomed to using vivid metaphors rather than precise ‘academic’ wording. Cocker herself suggests that ‘seams become audible in the spoken language of certain districts’ (which, she explains in correspondence, refers to interference between dialects/accents in contact situations), and that speech can be ‘twisted and reversed’ (this refers to usage such as Cockney ‘backslang’, as in *rofe* meaning ‘four’). She discusses these two phenomena in the context of her more general notions about language and the mind, chiefly with respect to her ‘margins’ (these notions are only to a limited extent empirically grounded).

***Language is replete with
quirkiness and humour; and,
contrary to some lay
impressions, linguists have much
to say about such matters.***

However, both phenomena are already rather well understood: the former is much more widespread in language generally than Cocker seems to imagine and normally requires no special explanation, and the latter is (obviously) typically involved in the

encryption of information. Novel perspectives are always of interest; however, they need to be explicitly expressed and exemplified if linguists are to assess their validity and/or significance, and they are more likely to be genuinely useful if they are informed by knowledge of existing ideas within the discipline (even if their proponents reject these ideas).

Fun with puns

The fringe of linguistics is not **exclusively** about the ideas of ‘nutters’. Language is replete with quirkiness and humour; and, contrary to some lay impressions, linguists have much to say about such matters.

Last time I discussed cases where words which are pronounced very differently are confusingly written identically in inadequate scripts. Of course, in most languages there are also many cases displaying genuine homophony, where unconnected words really do have the same pronunciation (Chinese, also discussed in my earlier instalment, has especially many homophones), or homonymy (same pronunciation **and** same spelling). Beginning linguistics students are confronted with delightfully ambiguous sentences such as *I saw her duck*, where the grammatical ambiguity of *her* (parallel with either *his* or *him*) combines with the homonymy of the

noun *duck* and the verb *duck* with their unrelated meanings.

Puns, such as *Two nuns went for a tramp in the woods* or those involving American state-names in the song ‘What Did Della Wear?’, exploit homonymy and associated sentence ambiguity for the purpose of humour. But sometimes no pun is actually intended, and unwanted (and amusing) misunderstanding results. Keilor, pronounced ‘keela’, is a suburb of Melbourne. A man phoned an associate and was told by the latter’s wife that he had gone out with friends drinking tequila; *tequila* was understood as *to Keilor* (homophonous), and the caller drove off to undertake a fruitless search through the several pubs in the district. In a similar way, a Scot’s ‘Do you no ken?’ (‘Don’t you know?’) was heard as ‘Do you know Ken?’; the listener was left trying to think of a relevant Kenneth. And in the 1986 movie *Clockwise* the headmaster played by John Cleese misinterprets the ambiguous one-word utterance ‘Right!’ as referring to the right-hand station platform rather than as confirming his own ‘Left?’, with far-reaching and highly comical consequences.

And with figures of speech

Zeugma and **syllipsis** are terms for cases in which a word is used in two senses – awkwardly or deliberately, for effect – in the same construction, as in *She went out in a bathchair and a flood of tears* (the preposition *in* can indicate either location or condition) – or, in more extreme cases, where one of the uses of the word is actually illegitimate, because of its specific meaning. In the *Odyssey*, the Greeks ‘see the smoke of fires and the voices of men’ on a neighbouring island. A more recent example occurs in the 1971 ‘Coca-Cola song’, where the New Seekers express the desire to **grow** apple trees, honeybees and turtle-doves.

And with names

A while ago I discussed the alleged significance of names. On a more mundane level, personal names, which

are inherited (surnames) or conferred by others (birth forenames), sometimes become ironically inappropriate or remarkably apt. An Australian farmer’s union leader had the alarming surname Blight; a transgendered friend’s surname was Middlesex; a young man I knew who regarded himself as a stud had the name Veryard! And in some multilingual communities names are sometimes chosen by parents or teachers who are not themselves proficient in the language in question. In Hong Kong, beginning tertiary students have traditionally adopted secondary, ‘English’ forenames for the convenience of English-speaking teachers (not generally encountered at school). The selections are not always the best. I met female students called Raymond and Timothy, girls called Puffin (as in books) and Dairy (pronounced as ‘Dairy’; she later adopted instead the name Alison, pronounced ‘Arrison’ and perceived with humour as a male name by some classmates who were aware of the then very prominent actor Harrison Ford) – and even one called National Geographic (abbreviated to N.G. and pronounced as ‘Angie’). Unfortunate cross-linguistic effects involve Thai girls with the name Supaporn, Vietnamese-speakers called Phuc, a South Korean official called Lee Bum Suck, the Filipino Roman Catholic Cardinal Sin, and the Mitsubishi vehicle-name Pajero, which closely resembles a Brazilian-Portuguese slang word meaning ‘wanker’ (predictably, the vehicle cannot be marketed in Brazil under this name).

The general linguistic point here is that the meanings of (almost) all words are essentially conventional and arbitrary. Some **written** symbols are – at least in origin – representational, and thus partly non-arbitrary; the best-known linguistic examples are the logographic characters used to write Chinese, which stand for entire words and – where these words refer to concrete entities – are in some cases ‘pictographic’. But the corresponding

spoken words are, of course, just as arbitrary as are the words of any other language; people who know no Chinese cannot guess what they might mean.

And with phrasebooks

Foreign-language phrasebooks provide endless amusement. One Icelandic phrasebook somewhat uselessly provides ways of referring to very hot weather, train timetables and land-frontiers. A multilingual European phrasebook gives polite ways of requesting assistance with car problems, ordering meals, etc. – except for the Italian versions, which are curt commands (‘Give me the menu!’). And one Indonesian phrasebook includes the exchange ‘Are you Javanese?’ – ‘No, I am a Luxemburger’ (surely an improbable mistake).

I once heard an adult ask a child how a toy ‘chuff-chuff’ worked; the child replied ‘There’s an electrical contrivance underneath’!

And even with grammar!

Some languages have grammatical features which strike learners as bizarre. In one Amerindian language, the main verb of every sentence **must** include an affix describing the interlocutor: a typical sentence might be ‘It’s good to see you [You are fat]’. In another, the verbs instead carry obligatory affixes indicating the strength of the evidence for the statement made: eye-witness, hearsay, deduction, dreaming, etc. Lying in such a language requires careful manipulation of the grammar as well as inventiveness and verisimilitude!

Talking to tackers

Adults often use ‘Motherese’ (‘baby-talk’) in speaking to children; but this is not always the best way to go. Some children’s language (and knowledge) is more sophisticated than their elders

imagine. I once heard an adult ask a child how a toy ‘chuff-chuff’ worked; the child replied ‘There’s an electrical contrivance underneath’!

Talking or not

Different communities have different norms for amounts of speech. The Rotinese of Indonesia talk almost all the time, and if they do not feel talkative they explain why, at some length. In contrast, the Puliya of India, whose society is neither especially co-operative nor especially competitive, have little use for speech and talk very sparingly, especially after the age of 40; linguists have found it difficult to collect corpora of sufficient length for the analysis of the language! Even in English-speaking

communities there is wide variation. My parents once overheard a conversation in a pub in sleepy rural Norfolk which began with the bartender asking a newly-arrived customer if he had been working in the beet fields that day; the barman knew what he drank, both knew the price, and after two hours of silence (and three pints) the man left, saying ‘Carrots’. It took Mum and Dad a while to work out that this was his answer! An earlier response would have invited a further exchange; but both parties also knew that there would have been no more to say about a day spent in the carrot fields. Voluble, repartee-loving Londoners and Liverpudlians with their busy lives do not have such conversations.

Editor’s note: Mark’s account of appropriate names reminds me of the occasion when, as a clinical psychologist, I was asked to see a patient called Mrs Daft and, on another occasion, a man with extreme levels of anxiety called Mr Fretwell. Since working in the forensic field I have been instructed several times by a solicitor called - appropriately or not, depending on your opinion of his profession - Mr Lawless. And in an account of how a defendant was arrested when a policeman forced his way into his house, the officer’s name was PC Bustin. (I have one more, involving a sex crime, which may be construed as offensive; I shall merely say that it involved a certain PC Dickin.)

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Comments on ‘Slips of the Pen’ (Language on the Fringe, Summer 2011)

From Ray Ward:

Being fascinated by language I always find Mark Newbrook’s contributions interesting. However, I must say I find very implausible the story about how the Bishop of Adelaide was thought to be dead because a headline about a man from Adelaide called Bishop, BISHOP OF ADELAIDE FOUND DEAD SEA MONSTER..., was accidentally broken after DEAD. Such a headline might say something like ADELAIDE MAN FOUND..., or it might give his name if he was well-known and it could be assumed it would be recognised, but it would be unlikely to give it if he was an ordinary, obscure person, since it would mean nothing to the readers. The name would, of course, be given in the item itself, but there would be no point in giving it in the headline. Also, it would surely occur to the headline writer that BISHOP OF ADELAIDE would be taken to mean, well, the Bishop of Adelaide!

Keith Waterhouse once gave a classic example of a (genuine) ambiguous headline, from *The Sun*: JAIL THREAT TO DRUG ROW STONE. On first seeing this I thought, as I think most people

would, that TO DRUG was a verb, and that the story concerned a Rolling Stone in prison who had been noisy or kicked up a fuss, and the prison authorities had threatened to drug him, that is, to give him some kind of tranquilliser to try to quieten him or calm him down. In fact the story was that a Rolling Stone, Keith Richards, was in trouble over a drug offence (DRUG ROW) and the authorities wanted him imprisoned (JAIL THREAT).

The big advantage of a character-based language ... is that it can be read by anyone who knows the characters, even if they do not know the spoken language.

I found very interesting Mark’s discussion of how written Japanese consists partly of Chinese characters (kanji), some with the same meaning (though differently pronounced) and some representing phonetically similar Japanese words with different meanings, and partly of a syllabic alphabet (kana), used to represent grammatical elements with no

Chinese equivalent and foreign names. Bill Bryson discussed this subject in his excellent book *Mother Tongue: The English Language*, saying, in his witty way, that kana is ‘used to render words and names (such as Dunkin’ Donuts and Egg McMuffin) that the ancient devisers of kanji failed to foresee’. And, of course, characters with the same meaning are also pronounced differently in the different Chinese languages (calling them dialects implies they are forms of the same language). Mark gives the example of the character for *person*, pronounced ‘ren’ in Mandarin and ‘yan’ in Cantonese, and also used with the same meaning in Japanese but pronounced ‘hito’. The big advantage of a character-based language (just about the only advantage, as opposed to the enormous disadvantage of having thousands of characters as opposed to a small set of letters) is that it can be read by anyone who knows the characters, even if they do not know the spoken language.

But we too have an example of characters with the same appearance and meaning but different pronunciations in different languages, and we use them

every day: numerals. Ask an English speaker what 1, 2, 3 say and they will say 'one, two, three'. But a French speaker would say 'un, deux, trois', a German one 'Ein, Zwei, Drei', etc., even though they are the same symbols.

The Japanese have also adopted a great many English words. I once saw a Japanese television reporter talking about a space shuttle flight, and he was obviously repeatedly saying 'space shuttle'. And when I worked for a television news agency I met two Japanese reporters, a woman who spoke English and a man who didn't. I showed them some videotapes with on-screen time codes, and when the woman spoke to her colleague in Japanese she was obviously frequently saying 'time code'. They do, however, sometimes amend English words almost out of recognition, the better to fit Japanese pronunciation. *Sebiro*, for a man's suit, for instance, comes from - 'Savile Row'! I once met someone who had taught English in Japan and who sent me a menu from a Japanese restaurant, indicating the kanji and kana parts (and they do, indeed, look quite different) and translating some of them. It had an 'Airishu Pubu' - Irish pub!

Mark Newbrook replies:

I believe that the 'Bishop of Adelaide' story is correct; I found it (years ago) in at least two sources. The confusing text cited was not a finished headline but (as I stated) the intro to a press release; I suppose that an initial MR or A MR had

been deleted in error. (But it is **possible** that the story is in fact apocryphal.)

The example JAIL THREAT TO DRUG ROW STONE is a very good one. When I was a child, I myself misconstrued/misunderstood the label DILUTE TO TASTE on concentrated fruit drink bottles, first as meaning 'diluted to the taste' (that is, 'not strong-tasting') and then as meaning 'dilute before tasting'; it was years before I understood its true sense!).

It is, in fact, a moot point whether Chinese should be described informally as one language (with much dialectal variation in these respects) or as a cluster of related languages.

Re Chinese: linguists hold that the distinction between 'closely related languages', on the one hand, and 'dialects of the same language', on the other, is spurious, or at best has only a **sociolinguistic** interpretation (it has been said that a language is a dialect with an army!). But it is true that the Chinese *fangyan* differ at least as much as do related languages such as Italian and Spanish in terms of phonology and word-forms (though not grammatically). It is, in fact, a moot point whether Chinese should be described informally as one language (with much dialectal variation in these

respects) or as a cluster of related languages.

The main advantages of the Chinese writing system (and the reasons for its continued use) are (1) its usefulness for resolving the high level of homophony (even allowing for tonal differences, all *fangyan* have many homophones) and (2) the grammatical/ lexical uniformity of the *fangyan*, which enables the same character to stand for phonologically very different forms (alphabetic spelling can handle these issues only to a very limited extent). The 'big advantage' identified here is an advantage **only** where the words of the dialects/languages in question correspond precisely. Chinese characters represent Chinese words (logographic), **not** cross-linguistically shared concepts (ideo-graphic); they cannot readily be used to write languages with words which are not generally translatable directly into Chinese.

It is not actually clear whether having thousands of characters really is a disadvantage, overall. Such a system is harder to learn in the first place but is very easy to use once learned, especially in reading.

The 'arabic' numerals (representing universally shared concepts) are indeed logographic (or indeed ideographic) characters, and beginning students of written Chinese often grasp the nature of Chinese characters by considering this system.

THE EUROPEAN SCENE

ASKE is a member of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations. It has an Internet Forum on which you can read comments on sceptical issues from contributors and post your own. To access this, log on to <http://forum.ecso.org/>.

Contact details for ECSO are:

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

Tel.: +49 6154/695021

Fax: +49 6154/695022

Website: <http://www.ecso.org/>

Via the website you can access articles, news, and commentary on a range of topics of interest to sceptics.

The 2012 World Skeptics Congress

<http://www.worldskeptics.org/>

This will be held from 17-20 May 2012 in Berlin. (M. Heap is representing ASKE so get in touch if you want to participate or have any ideas.)

OF INTEREST

The Nightingale Collaboration

<http://www.nightingale-collaboration.org/>

Keep updated on the Nightingale Collaboration's latest activities and campaigns against medical quackery and pseudoscience including, most recently, complaints against reflexology (foot-pummelling). Better still, sign up online for email copies of the Newsletter.

Sense About Science

www.senseaboutscience.org

From Dr Tabitha Innocent re the 'Ask for evidence' campaign (tinnocent@senseaboutscience.org).

'As you will know, the aim of the campaign is to get more members of the public asking advertisers, companies, government bodies and other organisations to set out the evidence they have for their claims. We have secured commitments from a growing number of champions for the campaign from many sectors of science and public life including Lord Krebs, Derren Brown (*some mistake surely – Ed.*), Professor Colin Blakemore, Jonathan Ross, young scientists, journalists and representatives of Mumsnet, patient groups and science bodies. This week we have been travelling around the country taking photos of these champions holding the "Ask for evidence" web button and these will be central to our launch publicity.

'If people don't question the evidence, many misleading claims will go unchallenged, and organizations, companies, politicians and other individuals will continue to make claims without meeting resistance when they try to persuade the public. We think the only way to address this is to equip people to ask questions about evidence for themselves. There is a real opportunity to change things, and we hope you can help us do that.

'Look out for news of the campaign tomorrow, starting with Tracey Brown on BBC Breakfast first thing. All the

latest will be posted on the "Ask for evidence" webpage:

www.senseaboutscience.org/askforevidence/

KEEP LIBEL LAWS OUT OF SCIENCE

Doctor Sued

<http://www.bmj.com/content/342/bmj.d3728.full>

A doctor who complained to a regulator about weight loss product is sued for libel. More details at:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/news.php/121/australian-critic-sued-by-weight-loss-product-manufacturer-for-libel>

Faith Healers Claim they can Cure Cancer

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/9519657.stm>

Edzard Ernst's Retirement

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?c=1§ioncode=26&storycode=416567>

Online Survey of Alternative Medicine

<http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/573750/Complementary-and-Alternative-Medicines-Sources-of-information-2-2>

or

<http://tiny.cc/0le9h>

Any comments/queries should be directed to Anna Stone whose students are undertaking the survey

(A.Stone@uel.ac.uk).

ASA Adjudication on Ainsworths Homeopathic Pharmacy

[http://asa.org.uk/ASA-action/Adjudications/2011/7/Ainsworths-\(London\)-Ltd/SHP_ADJ_148070.aspx](http://asa.org.uk/ASA-action/Adjudications/2011/7/Ainsworths-(London)-Ltd/SHP_ADJ_148070.aspx)

See also:

<http://www.zenosblog.com/2011/07/dangerous-homeopathy/>

Steve Jobs Regretted not using Conventional Medicine

<http://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/index.php/steve-jobs-medical-reality-distortion-field/>

Alarming Lack of Science behind European Wireless Tech Health Alert

<http://arstechnica.com/science/news/2011/05/european-politician-wants-to-get-phones-wifi-out-of-classrooms.ars>

Hydration for Health

<http://bit.ly/r4fMIC>

Listen to Margaret McCartney discussing Hydration for Health in a podcast at the above website.

Homeopathy for Animals

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/agri/dv/2012_agri_budg_amends_txt/2012_agri_budg_amends_txt_en.pdf (pages 35-36)

EU votes to spend 1.8 million euros on homeopathy for animals.

NHS Prescriptions for Homeopathy Fall

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/8729588/NHS-spending-on-homeopathy-prescriptions-falls-to-122000.html>

Just 16,359 NHS prescriptions for the heavily diluted treatments were written out last year, costing a record low of £122,000. This represents an eightfold drop on the 134,000 prescriptions recorded in 2000, which cost £831,000.

Mobile Phone Don't Cause Cancer

<http://www.bmj.com/content/343/bmj.d6387>

Danish researchers have concluded that mobile phones don't raise the risk of brain cancer in the largest study so far.

Placebo by Proxy

<http://www.bmj.com/content/343/bmj.d4345.full>

Clinicians' and family members' feelings and perceptions about a treatment may influence their judgments about its effectiveness

Autism Questioned as a Valid Diagnosis

<http://www.bmj.com/content/343/bmj.d5105.full>

‘Autism is not a scientifically valid or clinically useful diagnosis’

‘The prevalence of ASD [*autistic spectrum disorder*] increased from 4.5 to 160 per 10 000 in just four decades, with no biological evidence to support this construct emerging. The high ratio of affected males to females needs to be accounted for, but no link to the X or Y chromosomes has been found. Evidence for only a small proportion of the assumed total genetic risk has been found, and even this seems to be related more to general learning difficulties. Neuroimaging studies have consistently failed to replicate findings, and sample heterogeneity (reflecting IQ differences) is a common problem.....’

Autism and Internet Use

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/aug/06/research-autism-internet-susan-greenfield>

<http://bit.ly/pC2hXf>

Research linking autism to internet use is criticised:

‘[D]r Dorothy Bishop, a professor of neuropsychology at Oxford, wrote an open letter to Greenfield, saying that while she had admired her and been delighted when she became the first woman to deliver the Royal Institution Christmas lectures in 1994, she was “dismayed by the way in which your public communications have moved away from science” and accused her of giving opinions when no evidence existed to back them.’

‘More recently, Bishop said: “Your speculations have wandered on to my turf and it’s starting to get irritating”’.

British False Memory Society

http://www.bfms.org.uk/site_pages/frame-set.htm

The October edition of the newsletter is now available at the above website - click on ‘latest newsletter’. Read ‘Danger in the Consulting Room’ by Tony Freeman.

An Irishman has Spontaneously Combusted.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/europe/ireland/8783929/Irish-pensioner-died-of-spontaneous-human-combustion.html>

Yes indeed. Well, that was the coroner’s verdict.

The Psychic and the Earpiece

http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/sep/20/psychic-sally-morgan-hears-voices?CMP=EMCGT_200911&http://bit.ly/psJNhT

At a performance given by Sally Morgan, ‘Britain’s best loved psychic’, the people on the back row heard a man’s voice coming through a window saying the very words that she uttered 10 seconds later. Perhaps it’s the man who is psychic!

Project Barnum

<http://www.projectbarnum.co.uk/>

This arose from the news that ‘psychic’ Sally Morgan was being fed information on people attending her show through an earpiece (see above). Sign the online petition calling for venues to cancel demonstrations by mediums.

More on Replicating Bem (2011)

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/opinion/sunday/26ideas.html?_r=1

An article by Carl Zimmer has appeared in the New York Times Sunday Review and includes mention of the failed attempts to replicate Bem’s findings on ESP.

Astrological Association

[http://www.astrologicalassociation.com/pdfs/correlation/Correlation_27\(2\)_July_2011.pdf](http://www.astrologicalassociation.com/pdfs/correlation/Correlation_27(2)_July_2011.pdf)

The latest issue of the Astrological Association’s journal, *Correlation 27* (2), is now accessible online at the address above. The password is available from the Association <http://www.astrologicalassociation.com>.

Online Research on Beliefs, Personality and Evaluation of Media Contents

http://608media.com/beliefs_personality_and_media_contents2/

or email Kirsten Barnes
<mailto:kb381@cam.ac.uk>

‘All you would need to do is set aside 45 minutes to fill in an online questionnaire. It can be completed from any location with internet access and is straightforward and entirely anonymous. The purpose of this research is to investigate how beliefs and personality characteristics influence the evaluation of different types of media. Participants completing the study will be given the option of entering a prize draw to win one of three £50 amazon.co.uk vouchers. Please note: I’m afraid you won’t be able to take part if you can remember participating in a study run by myself that asked you to watch/listen to a set of short video/audio clips and then evaluate them – sorry.’

Experts’ Evidence and Experts Guesses

<http://www.jspubs.com/experts/ewire/itext.cfm?ewid=217&ewdid=7827>

The Court of Appeal has looked recently at likelihood ratios and concluded that justice is not served by dressing up an expert’s guesses as pseudo-science.

See also:

<http://www.jspubs.com/experts/ewire/itext.cfm?ewid=218&ewdid=7827>

Impartiality and Accuracy of BBC’s Coverage of Science

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/other/science_impartiality.shtml

Belgium UFO that Puzzled NASA was Polystyrene Fake

<http://www.rtl.be/info/belgique/faitsdivers/812149/le-myst-re-du-c-1-bre-ovni-des-ann-es-90-lucid-une-supercherie->

From Tim Trachet:

An unidentified flying object photographed high in the Belgian sky that puzzled even NASA scientists turns out to have been a fake made out of foam, the man behind the hoax has said. Though scientists pored over the picture of a triangular-shaped flying saucer with four lights, allegedly photographed in April 1990 by a young worker, the mystery remained intact until the man’s revelation on the RTL-TVI network.

Made of polystyrene in a matter of hours and photographed that night, the picture was released after several sightings of UFOs over Belgium in 1989 and 1990. Then aged 18, the man identified only as Patrick said he and a few friends ‘made it, painted it, hung it up and then photographed it’. The photo was the sharpest available to experts in a two-year period in which thousands of people across Belgium reported UFO sightings. Several days after its release, a Belgian air force plane was ordered to hunt down the UFOs across the country, but to no avail. Some believed the UFOs were new stealth fighters being tested by NATO. ‘It’s too easy to fool people, even with a cheap model’, said Patrick, adding he had decided it was time to come clean. The confession of the hoaxer on TV can be seen (in French) at the above website. See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belgian_UFO_wave

Global warming not due to Urban Warming

<http://www.berkeleyearth.org/>

Climate change sceptics are surprised at their research findings: Urban warming does not unduly bias estimates of recent global temperature change.

‘Space Storms’

<http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2011/08/13/riots-wild-markets-did-space-storms-drive-us-mad/>

or

<http://ind.pn/pyip92>

‘... the sun has been throwing bursts of highly charged particles into space in a phenomenon known as coronal mass ejections ... Some academics have claimed that such geomagnetic storms can affect humans, altering moods and

leading people into negative behavior through effects on their biochemistry ... It could of course be mere coincidence that this has been a rollercoaster week on the markets ...’

Does the Earth Rotate?

<http://ocham.blogspot.com/2011/08/does-earth-actually-rotate.html>

Discussed at the above website with links to the very entertaining broadcasts on the original site. ‘Not for the faint hearted’.

Three in Ten Americans Interpret the Bible Literally

<http://bit.ly/nj1ePp>

‘That is similar to what Gallup has measured over the last two decades, but down from the 1970s and 1980s. A 49% plurality of Americans say the Bible is the inspired word of God but that it should not be taken literally, consistently the most common view in Gallup’s nearly 40-year history of this question. Another 17% consider the Bible an ancient book of stories recorded by man.’

Teacher Sued for Disparaging Creationism Cleared on Appeal

<http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/news/2011/08/teacher-sued-for-disparaging-creationism-cleared-on-appeal.ars>

Atheists in the USA

http://www1.umn.edu/news/news-releases/2006/UR_RELEASE_MIG_2816.htm

or

<http://bit.ly/1f3njN>

also

<http://atheism.about.com/od/atheistbigotryprejudice/a/AtheistsHated.htm>

Atheists are the most despised and mistrusted minority in the USA.

The Plight of Atheists in the US Military

<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/arc-hive/2011/10/fighting-for-country-not-for-god/246950/>

Vicar doesn’t Believe in God

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14417362>

A vicar in the Netherlands says he does not believe in God.

PhD Research Opportunities

<http://www.jobs.ac.uk/job/ADH206/phd-research-bursaries-x4/>

Dr Elias Tsakanikos is keen to receive applications from good candidates who would be interested in undertaking PhD research in the area of schizotypy/unusual perceptual experiences, an area where Elias himself has conducted some fascinating research. Further queries to: elias.tsakanikos@kcl.ac.uk.

A Skeptic’s Dictionary for Kids

<http://sd4kids.skeptdic.com>

Written by Bob Carroll (author of *The Skeptic’s Dictionary*) for children aged 9 and above.

‘To add a custom link to the SD for Kids on your iPhone or iPad, use Safari to go to sd4kids.skeptdic.com and click the right-aiming arrow in the box (at the bottom center of the screen on the iPhone and left of the URL window on the iPad) and select “Add to Home Screen.” Give the icon a nickname like SD4kids and you’re all set. If you know any kids who read Dutch, a translation into that language has begun at <http://sdkinderen.skeptdic.com/>.’

Call for Contributions

If you have attended a conference or presentation, watched a programme, or read an article or book that would be of interest to readers, why not write a review of this, however brief, for the *Sceptical Adversaria* or the *Skeptical Intelligencer*? Would you like to contribute a regular column in your specialty or area of interest – e.g. an ‘On the Fringe’ feature? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features in the *Adversaria*?

UPCOMING EVENTS

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/speakers.php>
tamas.borbely@gmx.com

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in Room LGO1 in the New Academic Building, Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. Talks are open to staff, students and members of the public. Attendance is free and there is no need to book.

You are strongly recommended to register (at no cost) with the APRU's 'Psychology of the Paranormal' email

list to ensure that you are informed of any changes to the programme. Visit:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/email-network/>

and

<http://www.twitter.com/ChrisCFrench>

and

<http://feeds.feedburner.com/apru>

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Website for all venues:

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub/>

Go to the above website and then choose the venue you are looking for to access the upcoming events (and information on any associated local sceptic group). Current venues are now so numerous

there is almost bound to be a meeting near you.

CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

<http://www.cfilondon.org/>

No events currently scheduled, but keep an eye on the website.

QED MANCHESTER

10-11th March 2012

<http://www.qedcon.org/>

Speakers include David Aaronovitch, Sarah Angliss, Ophelia Benson, Edzard Ernst, Deborah Hyde, Robin Ince, Steve Jones, Maryam Namazie, Joe Nickell, Richard Saunders, Massimo Polidoro, and Ian Ridpath.

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

The answer is that, even though the frequency of the two services is the same (every 20 minutes) the Barnsley bus is scheduled to arrive 2 minutes earlier than the Doncaster bus. This means that in order to catch the

Doncaster bus, Albert must arrive at the bus stop within the 2 minutes between the Barnsley bus leaving the stop and the Doncaster bus arriving. At any other time, the Barnsley bus will arrive first. Two minutes is just one-tenth of the 20

minutes that separates one Barnsley bus from the next. Therefore 9 time out of 10 Albert will catch that bus if he comes to the stop at a time chosen at random.

ABOUT ASKE

Founded in 1997, ASKE is a society for people from all walks of life who wish to promote rational thinking and enquiry, particularly concerning unusual phenomena, and who are opposed to the proliferation and misuse of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. This is our quarterly newsletter and we have an annual magazine, the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

To find out more, visit our website (address below).

If you share our ideas and concerns why not join ASKE for just £10 a year? You can subscribe on our website, write to us at the address below, or email <mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk>

Association for Skeptical Enquiry
email: aske1@talktalk.net
website: <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk/>

For an electronic copy of this newsletter contact m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk